UBC Learning Exchange

annual update
2011-2012
A TRANSITION YEAR: DEVELOPING NEW PRIORITIES

This past year was a time of transition as the Learning Exchange re-evaluated its role within the University and the community, with the completion of the move of the UBC-CLI to the VP Students portfolio. With the support of the VP Academic, a key outcome of this re-evaluation was the establishment of a new Academic Director role to lead, develop and help implement an academic vision for the Learning Exchange. Expected to begin in the spring of 2013, the Academic Director will play a pivotal role in developing new ties and fostering new pursuits between the UBC academic community and Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside (DTES).

A unit strategic plan is also being developed to further define community engagement, student learning and academic priorities, through the leadership of the VP Communications and Community Partnership. UBC has the opportunity to be a leader in community engagement in the DTES, with the Learning Exchange acting as a focal point to coordinate and promote efforts for all of the University. Finally, a key priority for the upcoming year is to develop an ambitious fundraising plan to ensure the sustainability of current initiatives and growth of new ones.

Through this rebuilding period we continued to connect the University and the DTES, bringing hundreds of people together to learn from each other while building a stronger community. During the 2011-12 year we increased the level of our engagement in the DTES, including:

- Providing computer skills to over 500 people on site and at 16 community partner sites, and training 40 local residents to act as facilitators to support computer learning
- Training over 100 residents to facilitate ESL conversation sessions for over 800 adults, helping the latter gain essential language skills while learning about Canadian society and culture
- Engaging about 100 students in projects, placements and orientations, helping them gain valuable knowledge and skills, and setting the stage to increase our capacity for increased student involvement

With its roots in the Downtown Eastside, the Learning Exchange has the trust and credibility needed to further innovate in teaching, research and learning for students, faculty and residents. The following pages illustrate the impact of our work over the past year.
FROM LEARNER TO LEADER

Allan Olsen describes himself as a “blue-collar, trades” kind of guy. He trained as a millwright and has largely worked in construction. There was little in his past to suggest the 45-year-old resident of the Downtown Eastside might one day want to become a teacher. It’s now an option. Mr. Olsen muses about it over coffee while sitting at a table in the place that put him on that unexpected path...

Mr. Olsen taught computer skills in an alcohol recovery program he successfully completed. He remains clean and sober. He has lived in the Downtown Eastside – one of Canada’s poorest neighbourhoods – for six years. “It was the only place I could afford,” he says.

About a year ago, he came to the Exchange to volunteer and brush up on his skills so he could find work. Lately, he has been teaching basic computer literacy.

“It’s kind of opened my mind to other opportunities I never thought of – classes in teaching – things I thought I would never do before,” Mr. Olsen says of the Exchange.

Allan Olsen is a volunteer facilitator with the Learning Exchange’s Contributing Through Computers (CTC) initiative, which trained over 40 local residents to share their computer skills with hundreds of learners, formerly on the wrong side of the ‘digital divide’. Equally important, CTC has initiated or strengthened computer programs at over a dozen partner organizations, and is expanding to include more roles for UBC students.

Allan is now taking a leadership role, supporting new volunteers to set up computer workshops at other local organizations. He is working regularly in construction again, and is also considering enrolling to earn the Provincial Instructors Diploma.

[The Globe and Mail, 12/28/2011, Opening Doors For Vancouver’s Marginalized Residents.]
MORE THAN JUST LANGUAGE LEARNING

Over the past year the ESL Conversation Program, supported by HSBC Bank Canada, continued training local residents to be volunteer facilitators, and supporting them to lead English conversation workshops.

Highlights include:

- Twice as many UBC students volunteered, supplementing the efforts of local volunteer facilitators.
- Research on the Learning Exchange’s ESL volunteer training program informed a UBC Celebrate Learning Week discussion led by Professor Kenneth Reeder. The research was published in the *Canadian Journal of University Continuing Education* (Vol. 37, No. 2, Fall 2011, pp. 1-18), and was conducted by the UBC Centre for Intercultural Language Studies.
- Small capital funding from the Rotary Club of Vancouver Chinatown supported the volunteer facilitators to develop an ‘ESL Toolkit’—a resource library of lesson ideas and materials.
- The ESL Creative Writing group blossomed, hosting *Writing Across Borders*, a successful event at the 2011 Heart of the City Festival.

TAKING ON NEW CHALLENGES

Ian started visiting the Drop-In for the coffee, but continued to attend for over a decade because the Drop-In provided a welcoming and low pressure environment to socialize in. He had a clear interest in supporting the community, but was not able to take on the commitment required to become a facilitator in the ESL or Contributing Through Computers programs.

The turning point for Ian began when the Learning Exchange experimented with some new patron-led activities. Ian, a self-taught artist, proposed sharing his skills with fellow patrons. This led to the popular “Portrait 101” series, introducing people to the fundamentals of drawing the human face.

The success of this program inspired the development of the new Learning Lab initiative, which will offer ‘mid-level’ challenges for patrons, like Ian, to develop confidence in their leadership by sharing skills with others. Some preliminary activities included an ‘Economics Café’, guitar workshops and ESL business English—all led by residents, UBC students, or a combination of both. The Learning Lab will officially begin a three-year pilot in January 2013.
A Downtown Eastside mural project through the Learning Exchange demonstrated the power of combining student learning and community engagement. The project promoted social connection among tenants of the Oasis on East Hastings Street, tackled the problem of graffiti in the alley behind their building, and connected a UBC alumna to new creative experiences and the DTES community.

As project leader and recent UBC graduate, Kim Villagante worked closely with Oasis tenants from the outset. “Through the opportunity I had to do prolonged work with the Oasis—I got to know the tenants on a deeper level,” said Kim. “I thought I was coming in to do something great, but I actually received a lot more from learning from these people.”

Housing staff reported a much more engaged social atmosphere in the Oasis, triggered by the transformative creative process. Kim says, “When people are adding a paint stroke to a mural that they’re both working on, [they] have to work with each other’s differences. I remember a lot of encouragement happening between all the artists... to get up and paint regardless of self-doubts or ability.”

The resulting murals are a permanent reclamation of the alley space, and a way of projecting tenants’ humanity into the world. Neighbouring condominium owners have approached Kim to create similar murals with them. “Art is a huge community builder”, said Kim. “I wish there were more opportunities for visual art students to share their skills and educate themselves about the issues of the community.”
LIVING HISTORIES SURPRISE AND INSPIRE STUDENTS

Many Learning Exchange patrons have fascinating and moving life stories that demand to be heard. In February 2012, as a Reading Week Project, UBC students recorded a sample of this ‘living history’.

“Working on this project... meant a lot to me and has helped me realize the importance of following your passion and learning about what inspires you.”

- Christine Park, 4th year Anthropology student

Students had an amazing experience. They were inspired, for example, by one story-teller’s commitment to learning despite adversity. Another patron moved them to laughter with instructions on how not to get lost when hunting in the snow. And students were surprised to learn, after over three hours of conversation with another story-teller, that they had just completed “Part One”.

Patrons deeply appreciated the opportunity to share their histories and to have their experiences recognized and valued. In October, one student continued the story-telling project, exhibiting the material in the Downtown Eastside’s Heart of the City Festival, as part of UBC Celebrate Learning Week.

GIRLSMARTS EXPANDS TO THE EASTSIDE

In February 2012, GIRLSmarts, a UBC project to get more girls interested in computer science, showed that moving a little further East does a lot to increase access. Their fun and imaginative computer workshops are usually held on campus, and mostly attract girls from Vancouver’s Westside. Last year the program, run by UBC Computer Science and its graduate students, worked with the Learning Exchange to put on a workshop for Grade 6 girls from Eastside schools. GIRLSmarts brought its skills in educating youth, while the Learning Exchange connected with school and community workers to recruit girls who otherwise might not have participated. Combining these two sets of expertise ensured the intended impact could be realized. GIRLSmarts reported that “Feedback from participants was overwhelmingly positive and [the girls’] parents were really appreciative of the proximity of the workshop location.”
FREEDOM TO LEARN
PROF FINDS ACADEMIC CONVERSATIONS WITH DTES RESIDENTS REWARDING

In early 2012, Rima Wilkes, an associate professor of Sociology, led a seminar series for community members at the Learning Exchange. The seminars took an alternative look at Canadian history and society, covering topics such as First Nations’ rights and the experience of the Chinese in Canada. For Wilkes, it was a chance to take part in “pure learning” with people eager to contribute to the dialogue.

Lived experience, lively discussion
Wilkes appreciated the active discussions and the wide range of perspectives that resulted from engaging community members in academic topics.

“The kinds of things you talk about are very different [from classrooms on campus],” Wilkes said. “People at the Learning Exchange are usually older and so they have more life experience.” Sessions included both Canadian-born participants, newcomers, and people who’d been here a long time, so there were different versions of history to compare based on first-hand experience.

As an educator, Wilkes found that the freedom of intellectual conversations for learning’s sake was rewarding. “Because they’re not under pressure to do assignments and aren’t being graded, participants aren’t stressed about their performance. Removing that part of the equation provides a unique teaching experience.”

Getting involved was easy
Wilkes’ sessions with Learning Exchange participants were based on lectures she had developed for her full-time classes. Working with Learning Exchange staff was straightforward—they met together to identify what would work best for the participants involved, both in form and content. For colleagues considering a community teaching experience, but who may hesitate because of workload considerations, Wilkes says there’s no need for concern, adding that the benefits of “being out there in the community” make it all worthwhile. Residents agreed wholeheartedly that faculty like Wilkes convey passion along with discipline, leading conversations that spark new understandings.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

At the Learning Exchange all the people and groups we work with are integral to creating a place where everyone has something to teach and something to learn. Thank you to UBC students, UBC faculty, donors, community organizations and campus units for collaborating to effect the change-work we do. Although the individuals are too numerous to name, we would like to thank the following organizations and donors.

We look forward to working with you in 2013!

Community Partners

Asian Canadian Writers’ Workshop Society/Ricepaper Magazine
Britannia Community Centre
Building Community Society
Carnegie Community Centre Learning Centre
Community Arts Council of Vancouver
Downtown East Education Centre
Downtown Eastside Literacy Roundtable
Downtown Eastside Neighbourhood House
Heart of the City Festival, Vancouver Moving Theatre
Kiwassa Neighbourhood House
La Boussole Centre Communautaire Francophone
Mount Pleasant Branch, Vancouver Public Library
Mount Pleasant Neighbourhood House
Neighbourhood Housing Society
Network of Inner City Community Services Society (over 15 organizations in the DTES)
Pathways Information Centre (now closed)
Ray-Cam Community Centre
S.U.C.C.E.S.S.
The Salvation Army Vancouver Harbour Light
Vancouver Community Network
Vancouver Urban Core Community Workers’ Association (consortium of DTES organizations)

Campus Partners

Continuing Studies
Centre for Intercultural Language Studies
Robson Square
UBC-Community Learning Initiative

Donors

HSBC Bank Canada
Carraresi Foundation, in memory of Augusto Carraresi
Kaatza Foundation
Vancouver Foundation
Rotary Club of Vancouver Chinatown
Individual Donors